The Killer of Modern Times: Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune*

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Abstract
This essay explores the reasons why Les Murray's five-book novel in verse *Fredy Neptune* may be considered a masterpiece of crime fiction for undermining the norms that traditionally codify that genre. The norms regulating especially the detective-story are here seen as epitomising the narcissistic principles that have predominantly shaped mainstream Western art and ideology since the dawn of modern times and strongly impacted upon the course of European history both within national and colonial territories. It is, in short, this entire Western episteme that Murray's novel questions through its 'misuse' of crime fiction, as its German-Australian protagonist gets involved in the two World Wars and becomes a German or a British spy depending on the war-line he happens to find himself. This essay first lays bare the critical framework through which I have looked at Murray's novel; then it points out the way it interweaves with Shakespeare's second Henriad but especially with Woolf's fiction opening a dialogue with these crucial texts of early and late modernity; to then conclude by trying to see what formal connections *Fredy Neptune* may finally have with the genre of crime fiction.

Key words: modernity, war, pain.

1. Crime fiction at the antipodes: Les Murray's poetics

"We can never presume to know, perhaps not even when they are strangling us, which fingers are clinging in terror and hope and which clawing with destructive intent". (Murray 1988: 533)

These words from an essay by the Australian poet Les Murray, entitled "Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment", are representative of Murray's poetics' controversial liaison with crime fiction and the type of knowledge this genre presupposes. The words in the quote state the independence of the literary text from its readers' needs;

should they hold it as a prayer book, a sacred object providing inspiration, or clutch it with the intention of suffocating its message, either way, the book is safe as long as its material form survives which contains the mystery of its embodiment. "This interiority is deeply mysterious, when we can bear to think of it, in its ability to cross time and admit no intruder. […] It is, finally, preserved by its death to this world" (p. 533). By contrast, traditional crime fiction is based on the notion that mystery is there to be explained in cooperation with the reader and to assuage a need of being reassured about the solidity of the social order in which he lives. The typical crime fiction book does presume to know what type of need it satisfies and all the game it plays with its reader is to serve a political necessity to confirm and conform to moral values of a secular order (Scaggs 2005). It is also in this major respect that Murray's poetics and the five-book verse novel *Fredy Neptune*, object of this essay, are at the antipodes of crime fiction.

Because this antithesis is crucial for understanding *Fredy Neptune*, I will linger briefly on Murray's aesthetic principles as he has exposed them in the above-mentioned essay. In "Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment" Murray says that three are the ingredients composing a complete object of art: thought, dream and gesture, which he also defines as forebrain thinking (or waking mentation), hindbrain thinking (or dreaming or reverie), and the somatic dimension of the body. This fusion, however, is by no means limited to the embodiments of art works or literary texts – these being in fact the large minority of embodiments – but characterises human life at large, because humans are poetic creatures who need to make sense of life by surrounding themselves with meaningful representative texts, 'poem-events,' such as books, objects, ideals, lifestyles, etc.

> For this reason, the world we have inherited is a vast texture of overlaid and overlapping poetries, often competing inside individual human heads. It is possible that through this clamant texture we never see the world as it is. Or if we do see odd details, we immediately begin ordering them into a poetic structure, our own or a ready-made one. Loyalty quickly wraps itself around almost any instance of vision or purported inspiration and defends it sturdily." (Murray 1988: 520)

Depending on the quality of the fusion of the three components, we may have two types of texts, *poemes* and poems; the former are

flawed imbalanced fusions, whose meanings are perishable and changing over time; the latter eternal because their meanings remain self-sufficient beyond historical time. And although *poemes* and poems may look alike, they diverge in one substantial way, because *poemes* are vision-constructs demanding users to conform to their principles – being governed by a policing desire to rule over external reality – whereas poems rely on their own timelessness and do not need to persuade anyone to carry out their ideas.

Poemes and poems – which, for the purpose of this essay we may start thinking of in terms of crime fiction and crime literature – also differ in the way they use language. Whereas real poems are made of *wholespeak*, a type of wording stemming from a complete fusion of mind, body and imagination, *poemes* are made of *narrowspeak*, a type of language dominated by rational thought – at the expense of the dream – and the body components – and in which "meanings" exhaust themselves in linear goal-oriented cause-effects and their primary goal is the reader's satisfaction (p. 519). The relation that each type of vision-construct has with the reader is opposite: one aspires to feed desires that deviate from introspection and encourage forms of mobilisation; the other is based on the self's quest.

Both poems and *poemes* have somatic effects upon their users as they both engage our "autonomic nervous system" over which we have no direct rational control, causing a "state of alert in us", which Murray describes as a "mirror or echoic state" between the wish for action and surrender, in which we half-consciously imitate what we see performed or described before us. Such mimetic mysteries allow the exact reproduction of any sense impression that has been left in us and which is transferred to the body bypassing the conscious mind (p. 521).

In providing another example of a 'state of alert', Murray talks about the vicarious mode, typical of sport, in which one identify with the spectacular performance that one is watching while also remaining detached from it, and whose success or failure affects us as if it were ours. We need only think of the deep sense of frustration after an important sports competition in which *we* have lost (p. 522). Significantly, what happens during similar states occurs before the rational mind gets any control of the situation and may even try to avoid such indelible impact, in the attempt to protect us from what

we have seen, heard, felt, etc. Particularly powerful *poemes*, like a dictator's speech – Murray gives the example of Hitler's hypnotic rhetoric – may work as effective imprints, building on the fact that later what an audience has heard or seen will animate their "own" convictions (p. 524).

A final crucial point that Murray makes in the essay is that since the Renaissance, but particularly after the Enlightenment, European culture has downplayed the somatic component of texts and given centrality to rational thought, with the twofold consequence that people have searched for ecstatic experiences outside literature, art or religion, and have been deprived of a crucial weapon through which to defend themselves from the escapist joy offered by *poemes* (p. 522). It is Murray's long-standing position that since the Enlightenment the hope for real poems to exercise any significant power upon us has been very remote. By attributing indisputable power to rational thinking and its representations at the expense of the unconscious and the body, understanding guilt and responsibilities has become increasingly more difficult whilst the spiritual sides of human existence have been relegated to playing but a marginal role alongside the arts and the imagination. Reduced to daylight knowledge, the human world is only subject to investigations in which everything is explainable to the infallible mind that has long excluded partnership with less clear and less disciplinable parts of human nature.

> All the mental operations we are capable of are conditioned by the body […] we are based on somatic substrates. That might not be worth stating, except that nowadays […] material things and even other dimensions of our mind are seen as properties of appearances. […] We, and it is very much an abstract 'we', want to be beyond their demands, or at least in control of such of their demands as we choose to accede to. They are not admitted to the sphere of freedom; rather, anything like freedom on their part is feared as chaos or disintegration, and we hope to be free in relation to them. This is the fruition of a long spiritual history in the West. […] *All remains at the mercy of a sensibility that at its heart still resembles that of Sherlock Holmes at the end of* The Sign of the Four *when he says: 'But love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true, cold reason which I place above all things*'. (Murray 1988: 525ff, emphasis added)

In a way, Murray's distinction between *poemes* and poems recalls

Fredric Jameson's theory on mass-culture and the commodification of art works, which he too sees represented in the genre of crime fiction, whose intrinsic components and type of fruition characterise art in the age of consumerism (Jameson 1979: 132). Whereas in previous ages art was considered as self-sufficient, having no finalities in the social world of politics or business, in contemporary times art works are considered commodities like any other and their very value is judged in relation to their use. Commodification, Jameson argues, has become part of the form and content of the literary work, because its instrumental function has replaced its lack of practical purpose, its "finality without an end" and it has done so by changing our reading process, by restructuring it as the fruition of a means, the book, to a precise end, so that we now read books like detective stories, in which all that counts is the conclusion as well as the way we are led to it[1].

In Murray's terms, therefore, crime fiction texts may be considered as *poemes* because they are products based on ratiocination, structured as clue-puzzle games that create an illusion of active participation but are actually meant to provide the consumer's satisfaction, a satisfaction that meets the ideological demands of mass society. That is the opposite of a text that should never presume to know its reader's intentions. From its historical beginning, crime fiction has been representative of the interpretative process, moved by the urge to impart a method for understanding reality in terms that are presented as objective but which are rooted in the wish to confirm the status quo. The traditional detective personifies scientific pragmatism and the method to establish objective truth via induction, whose evidence is provided by the amount of data and objective proof he gathers during the investigation, but which in reality only prove a deductive process rooted in the detective's own cultural model, in which the reader is made to confirm his belief (Scagg 2005).

[1] "The detective story is to be sure an extremely specialized form: still, the essential commodification of which it may serve as an emblem can be detected everywhere in the sub-genre of contemporary commercial art, in the way in which the materialization of this or that sector or zones of such forms come to constitute an end and a consumption-satisfaction around which the rest of the work is then 'degraded' to the status of sheer means" (Jameson 1979: 130-48).

One main function of classical crime fiction has been to protect societies from taking sight of social and historical facts that would have threatened the established order, by assuring that momentary evils and bad intruders would always be readily expelled. The Golden Age of crime fiction coincides with the 'age of anxiety', the years of the two World Wars and the dramatic rise of totalitarianisms, in front of whose carnage and violation of the most basic human values, crime fiction has gone on representing upper-class closed-in rural communities, a stylised view of corpses, thus supplying anxiolytic that assuaged people's wish to avoid knowing the truth and in fact facilitating their acceptance of the dramatic choices of nationalisms (Scaggs 2005).

Auden's essay series *Hic et Ille* presents what he believes to be a widespread narcissistic pathology consisting in an ill-posed egotistical self-love causing the refusal to face one's troubles and the consequent inability to develop a genuine interest in other people, which has increasingly affected Western culture since the Renaissance (Auden 1962). Auden's reflections significantly culminate in the essay "The Guilty Vicarage", in which he analyses the structure of the detective-story in order to understand the source of his own addiction to that genre, arriving at the conclusion that it satisfies his ardent infantile desire for prelapsarian innocence, allowing him to avoid individual responsibilities which, by contrast, real literature compels him to fulfil.

> The magic formula is an innocence which is discovered to contain guilt; then the suspicion of being the guilty one; and finally a real innocence from which the guilty other has been expelled […] by the miraculous intervention of a genius from outside who removes guilt by giving knowledge of it. If one thinks of a work of art which deals with murder […], its effect on the reader is to compel an identification with the murderer which he would prefer not to recognise. The identification of phantasy is always an attempt to avoid one's own suffering: the identification of art is a compelled sharing in the suffering of another. (Auden 1962: 225ff)

Such cultural orientation à la Sherlock Holmes has evolved, Auden sustains, through a progressive marginalisation of the body in the arts. Auden uses the figure of Falstaff and his story in Shakespeare's second *Henriad* to recall the moment when the fracture from the body was sanctioned and the mind began to have indisputable

power upon the body to the point of inducing its sensations by planning its somatic manifestations, so that the body became a valet to reason and an unreliable source for the creation of meanings. The entire *Henriad* from *Richard II* to *Henry V* shows the extent to which people's reactions and events are planned like films so that no place is left for the body's initiative and passions and, reduced to playacting and inconsequent gestures, devoid of its main functions, including that of partaking in the life of the imagination, the body becomes ill, depressed and hypochondriac, in a desperate attempt at being accorded some significance. We need only think of Falstaff's concern with his pee and his monologue on the waste of his wit.

Autobiography and crime fiction, Auden notices, are Narcissus's favourite literary forms for the obvious reason that they enhance his own image of himself, his life's relevance and his mind's brilliancy. His self-reflexive lens, Auden arguments, becomes disgraceful when it turns to look at the pains of others, since the ego's constitutive incapacity to feel sympathy enhances Narcissus's self-esteem through *Shadenfreude*, the perverse joy in viewing sufferance (Auden 1962). As Shakespeare's *Henriad* well explains, it is a backfire gaze that kills the vital energy of the onlooker and the self-esteem of the 'object' who sees himself in a distorting mirror. In *Fredy Neptune* this kind of mortal weapon works alongside those causing slaughters and ethnic cleansing, like invisible explosions going off in people's "relationships," determining their unaware participation in the on-going conflicts.

If we may conclude that Murray's poetics defines itself in opposition to the cultural and aesthetic assumptions in which crime fiction developed as to the point of becoming the emblem and unsuspected agent of the worst aspects of modernity, *Fredy Neptune* incarnates that antipodal position from the very circumstances that led to its writing. In the same year when his seminal essay was published, Murray fell victim of a long clinical depression, as he describes in *Killing the Black Dog: a Memoir of Depression* in which he explains how he came to realise that his distress was related to the vast pathology from which modernity has long been afflicted.

> As I unearthed my buried troubles, I saw how closely bound up they were with features of modern society that I loathed, such as demonstrations or

radicalisms. […] I came to realise that the tone of much in the Totalitarian Age that may just now be drawing to a close exactly resembles clinical depression. It is the secret co-opted fuel of many causes, and is not exposed for what it is because it is as common, and exploitable, on one side of politics as on the other. If a fifth of all people in this stressed age will suffer at least one depressive episode in their lives, there is clearly an enormous pool of potential recruits among people who haven't identified the real roots of their trouble and so are available to hate substitutes or near-enough versions. (Murray 1997: 20-1)

In 1992, while Murray was emerging from his mental disease, the protagonist of *Fredy Neptune* sprung up in his imagination asking him to write his appalling story. "I'm Frederic Boettcher, a German Australian sailor born in a farm around Dungog, in New South Wales. I lost sensation because I saw something unbearable and I couldn't do anything to avoid it: in 1915 I saw some Armenian women burn alive in Turkey. How can I stand to live in a world where these kinds of things may happen?" (Murray 2005: 213, my translation). This is the dilemma Fredy poses to the author and that the novel sets out to resolve by transcribing the story the way Fredy told it, straight from Murray's unconscious and written in a steady state of hypnosis in which Murray entered and exited at regular intervals between 1993 and 1997, when he closely followed Fredy across the tragedies of the first half of the 20th century.

Fredy tells his story in the language of action films and comic strips typical of his proletarian background (p. 224). His working-class idiolect of the Australian outback, is transcribed by Murray who, willing to help him find an explanation to his incredible story, makes discreet use of his literary insights by choosing words and imagery that lead us to scenarios that are unthinkable for Fredy, but familiar to Murray and which contribute to form a rich commingling of low and high styles. And because it is mostly insights rooted in Virginia Woolf's modernist fiction that interweave with Fredy's narrative, the novel realises a combination of mass-culture and modernist forms which reverses Jameson's polar view of their interrelationship as defining the binary status of art in the age of consumerism[2].

[2] "Mass culture presents us with a methodological dilemma which the conventional habit of positing a stable object of commentary or exegesis in the form of a primary text or work is disturbingly unable to focus, let alone resolve; in this sense, also, a

Fredy's adventures take place in the same years in which Woolf's fiction is set and, as I'll try to demonstrate, it is scattered with traces that lead us into Australian places within some of Woolf's novels as well as into the heart of Woolf's reception of her times. Such links either relate Fredy's working-class manners to the sophisticated thoughts of the privileged young Londoners of *The Waves*, or contrast Fredy's crude experience of the wars with the rural upper class scenarios characterising *In Between the Acts*; or oppose Fredy's response to the facts of history to that of Orlando in the homonymous novel. As a result, they are all made to share the same climate of profound existential division, even though in opposite social conditions, in which it is the sensitivity of the working-class Fredy to bring hope for a resolution.

Let's take *Orlando* as an instance, a name that means "a ship proudly sweeping across the Mediterranean from the South Sea" (Woolf [1928] 2006: 222). It defines exactly the way Murray's novel begins with Fredy Boettchen working on a cargo ship moving from the Pacific to the Mediterranean, its course dramatically switching from freighter to warship, as the Great War has just broken out dragging Fredy into it, if only, he says, as a mariner.

2. The absolution case of *Fredy Neptune*

The Middle Sea is the title of Murray's novel's *Book I*, entirely set in Mediterranean countries, including Turkey, where Fredy gets involved in a primary scene of mass murder. This is the very same told in an apparently marginal episode of *Orlando*, whose protagonist seems to remain indifferent while apprehending that a group of Turkish women has been 'burnt in effigy' in a market square as a consequence of the pending lawsuit that Orlando just won in that country. The novel quotes the way Orlando's biography

dialectical conception of this field of study in which modernism and mass culture are grasped as a single historical and aesthetic phenomenon has the advantage of positing the survival of the primary text at one of its poles, and thus providing a guide-rail for the bewildering exploitation of the aesthetic universe which lies at the other, a message mass or semiotic bombardment from which the textual referent has disappeared" (Jameson 1979: 138).

reports the case, ascribing no importance to it: "["The Turkish women by the dozen were burnt in effigy in the market-place…] – all of which was properly enclosed in square brackets, as above, for the good reason that a parenthesis it was without any impact on Orlando's life" (Woolf [1928] 2006: 226). By contrast, this very scene that Fredy watched during the Great War in Turkey he reports as having had a devastating impact upon him and as being the cause of all his following misadventures:

> They were huddling, terrified, crying,
> crossing themselves, in the middle of men all yelling.
> Their big loose dresses were sopping. Kerosene, you could smell it
> The men were prancing, feeling them, poking at them to dance –
> Then pouf! they were alight, the women, dark wicks to great orange flames.
> (Murray 1998, *Book I*: 16)[3]

From that moment onward, Fredy undertakes tribulations revolve around his wish to tell, to confess and be absolved from the guilt of having been an impotent eyewitness of that scene, whose shock first turned him into a leper and a quasi-corpse, and then stabilises him into a desensitised body endowed with the strength of a superman. In order for Murray to listen and try to understand its mystery Fredy recounts first-hand the story of his body-change and of his fights to re-become normal.

From beginning to end Fredy looks for expiation and until final recovery uses all his force to rescue people he sees in mortal danger, progressively getting rid of his guiltfeelings and regaining sensibility, if not full understanding of his story. The first time he confesses, he is in Jerusalem during WWI among a dark congregation of religious men, one of whom listens to him and prescribes a cure that consists of learning to pray wholeheartedly so as to be delivered.

> Black clergy all over, with their hands out. Then one in a hood
> said clearly: y*our response to the death of our sisters is good,*
> *best of all outsiders. If ever you can pray*
> *with a single heart to be free of it, it will leave you that day*. (p. 48)

[3] All the quotations from the poem are from the Engl./Ital. 2004 editon with parallel translation by M. Morini, *Freddi Nettuno. Un romanzo in versi*.

In trying to put into practice the black priest's mysterious suggestion, Fredy's undertakes an interior journey in which he learns to care for others while passing from one massacre to another. After the trauma of seeing the Armenian women burn in Turkey in *Book I*, in *Book II* he is back in Australia where he inadvertently helps some gangsters, a mistake that in *Book III* takes him to North America away from his family, where he saves a man's life but forgets to ask whether the man actually survived. Then in *Book IV*, Fredy is in Hitler's Germany where he saves an old Jew from a Nazi squad, this time inquiring after the man's fate and, where, later, even adopting an unimpaired German child destined to sterilisation. Finally, in *Book V*, when WW2 has just ended and Fredy is back home in Australia again, he refuses to watch the Hiroshima bomb explosion, because he realizes that it would trigger the wrong emotion, which proves that he is beginning to become normal:

> the cameras made even black pain silvery, and somehow
> it all wound on to the sun-disc of the Bomb
> like belt taking up on a wheel, or chain flowing off it.
> But I refused escape or cure. I fought to stop sensation
> as it crept on, because it came on vile wrong conditions.
> I wouldn't be cured by others' pain and destruction:
> I was better cursed than cured by *the light* of this new full burn.
> I drove back touch, I prayed with a splintering heart
> and no one could help, no one could be told it was happening
> but I stayed clean and bodiless, for the right solution. (Murray [1998] 2004, *Book V*: 784, emphasis added)

It is at this point that the pun on 'the light' gives us a clue to find out the nature of Fredy's guilt, against which he has been powerless in spite of his physical strength, a sense of unwanted complicity with the real killers, perhaps, whose form Fredy has finally managed to reject.

Throughout the five-book narration of Fredy's herculean efforts to become normal, the novel is scattered with traces that compose the imagery evoking the figure of Falstaff, recurring watchwords that arouse Falstaff's derisive hanging out, his cold and angry solitary death and his jolly resurrection in the *Merry Wives of Windsor* – all of which warms up the spectral climate of the battlefields and the martial demeanour of people, casting a dawning atmosphere of

childishness and a touch of more innocent forms of being an outlaw. In *Book I* we see Fredy in cold Jerusalem, his leprous body nearly a corpse, as he bursts out crying like a little kid, his sufferance in full view with people both attracted and ready to condemn that shameless scene.

> And the stars were like clear spikes – because I was cold!
> […]
> *I'm dead*, I screamed. *I was alive, I'm dead again*,
> and I burst out crying, in that body,
> gulping up up up, tears swamping my sight, tasting salty,
> and a crowd collecting round, at a trot. The last, the very
> last thing you allow ever: to be caught out both different and helpless.
> Humans kill you for less. (*Book I*: 50)[4]

Then Fredy gets arrested and the woman who rescues him uses the same means of escape that save the resurrected Falstaff in the *Marry Wives of Winsor*, by first hiding him in her *wash-basket* and then by giving him a *woman's dress*, a burka, to walk away free.

> Then I came back to the body she was patching-up by degrees:
> *those men: did they bring me here? – Nope. I carried you*
> *in a wash basket – in a wash basket? – Yep. On my head.*
> *The same head you speak English with? Armenian, Arabic, Turkish, English.*
> *I thought if the solder cops got you again, you'd be dead.*
> […]
> next day I sat the body upright, in a blur.
> I was going back into working it again,
> and I asked her for one of those tent-gowns the Muslim women
> often wear. *A burque? for you to travel in?* (pp. 64ff)[5]

From beginning to end we see Fredy traverse and escape battlefields and households like different scenes in the one film-set, carrying all along the impact of the burning-women upon him, a story not even the people closest to him can bear to listen to and a circumstance that strangely relates Fredy to Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, making Fredy suspected of having committed a similar mortal sin. In all his

[4] Falstaff's death is described in *Henry V* II.iii. 5-43.
[5] *Merry Wives of Winsor* III.iii. 115-21 and IV.ii. 73-74.

flights by land, sea and air, Fredy defines himself as a sailor who only happens to be among soldiers. "*I'm a sailor, not a soldier*" is a sentence he is never tired of repeating, like a burden clashing against the mocking comments of all Australians who are fighting in the wars, "*So you're still a sailor, sly bugger! Seen any of the war?* (*Book I*: 38), challenging their idea of Australia as a nation founded on war, any time Fredy calls himself "an Australian and a sailor" (*Book I*: 42). In spite of the fact that he may be lying – anyone familiar with Conrad knows that sailors' yarns are synonym of lies – a profound truth does *lie* in Fredy's stubborn insistence but beyond his awareness, suggested by the novel's imagery whose wavering evasive motion blurs the distinct actions described by Fredy, through a recurring use of the words *wave* and *dodge* in all their semiotic gamut, telling us what sea may be stirring in the back of Fredy's mind. Open any book of the novel and you find Fredy "giving people the big wave" (*Book I*: 124); Fredy "that almost waved" to his killers (*Book I*: 122); Fredy that "waved his hands" (*Book I*: 114) starting a brawl (*Book I*: 114); seeing people exercising psychological power on others thorough the gesture of "waving them away" (*Book II*: 158) but never doing it himself. In concomitance, you'll see Fredy "dodging around" in daily life (*Book I*: 158) and "around the war" (*Book I*: 166), wearing "fancy dress dodges" (*Book II*: 310) to stay under cover and elude it, or "dodging around the railway yards" (*Book III*: 476) as he travels without ticket across the US in the segregation years, or Fredy who "dodged aside in Louisville" (*Book III*: 414), in search for an isolated space where to mediate on his sense of guilt; avoiding a mortal stab, "to dodge a long-handled fighting-axe" (*Book III*: 412), or the Nazi police in Berlin "doing their undodgeable dirty work" (*Book IV*: 628); reluctant to know of the Hiroshima massacre, "dodged knowing too much about the Atomic Bomb" (*Book V:* 782). *Dodging waves* take us to wander into the intricacies of Woolf's Australian world.

In *The Waves*, for example, the sea-scape dimension characterises the existential fluctuation of the young characters but particularly Louis, the well-off Australian adolescent whose family has settled in Britain, who is constantly thinking of the insurmountable difference of his Australian body making him unfit the kind of identity required in the British environment. We are shown how Louis's reasoning on the pain that his accent and outlook are

causing him dramatically translates into actual imprisonment and death sentences during the same war years, but also the way Louis's intellectual combativeness becomes, in Fredy, pure action against the blind rules of nationalisms.

I am now a boy only with a colonial accent […] The day has been full of ignominies and triumphs concealed from fear of laughter. I am the best scholar in the school. But when darkness comes I put off this unenviable body – my large nose, my thin lips, my colonial accent – and inhabit space. […] I will achieve my life – Heaven grant that it be not long – some gigantic amalgamation between the two discrepancies so hideously evident to me. Out of my sufferance I will do it. I will knock. I will enter. (Woolf [1931] 2000: 38)

Languages and accents are the mark of one's loyalty or betrayal to one or the other nation, so that Fredy's bilingualism and translingual use of German and English tear him constantly apart.

Boytcher? Isn't that German?
[…]
you may just be innocent, but this isn't civilization.
I can and will shoot you.
This is battle, where bad things are done.
See how I'm dressed in these legal killing clothes?
Foot soldiers were mobbing past. *You! Help me take this spy in*.
(*Book I*: 58)

Throughout *The Waves*, it is the Australian-British Louis that experiences the fracture between the true self and its historical embodiment and who records the pain of stigmatisation for which the body is blamed.

Identity failed me. We are nothing […] I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my feet across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed. […] life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea. It is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses. And yet we have invented devices for filling up the crevices and disguising these features. Here is the ticket collector. (Woolf [1931] 2000: 47)

Fredy, just like Louis, never interrupts the wavering thread of his reasoning but hangs firmly from it, an act of resistance that anchors his individuality in the profundities of his own humanity, no matter what the policed world believes on the surface.

> Now *I hang suspended without attachments*. We are nowhere. We are passing through England in a train. […] but my body passes vagrant as a bird's shadow. I should be transient as the shadow on the meadow, soon fading, soon darkening and dying there […] were it not that *I coerce* my brain to form in my forehead; *I force* myself to state, if only in one line of unwritten poetry, this moment; to mark this inch in the long history that began in Egypt. […] But if now I shut my eyes, if I fail to realise the meeting-place of past and present, […] human history is defrauded of a moment's vision. Its eye, that would see through me, shuts […]. (Woolf [1931] 2000: 48ff, emphasis added)

As in a translation of Louis's thoughts into bodily actions, we see Fredy display his physical strength and remain suspended in mid-air held up by his muscles, whereby he earns a living by eluding both the inhuman and the gravitational law. "I sat in the air with my numb bum held to the fence / by gravity; I was terrified I might never get down" (*Book II*: 198).

The blurred vision of timeless existence characterises William Dodge's presence and role in *Between the Acts*, his suffered compliance with the present state of being and his nervous attendance of the historical pageant staged by the mysterious play-writer Miss La Trope, whose pageant of British history is incomprehensible to the British audience who are made to feature unawares in the representation of the present during the on-going Second World War. "'The weariness, the torture, and the fret…' William Dodge added, burying the end of his cigarette in a grave between two stones" (Woolf [1941] 1990: 44). "Dodge remained behind. 'Shall I', he murmured, 'go or stay' Slip out some other way? Or follow, follow, follow the depressing company?'" (p. 73) Just like Fredy, who yet drags himself across the far less comfortable theatres of the wars, Dodge stealthy browses through the play's acts, like a suffering feline passing through the bars of history yet seeing them endlessly multiply, unable to exit the play even during the break before the official performance begins again. "They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a

spectacle. Nothing happened. The tick of the machine was maddening" (p. 128).

In all his journeys across the war theatres Fredy gets stuck in the quagmire of endless *poemes* like scripts people recite forgetting themselves, from Banjo Paterson's Australian ballads, to Turkish traditional verse, European aristocratic aesthetics, the Nazi mentality or Australian workers' demonstrations. The widespread fakery condition is emblematised in the part of the story where Fredy recounts his life as an extra in Hollywood, where ex-soldiers act in war films and acting breaks out into real fighting, as during the shootings of the 1927 film *October*, about the Russian Revolution:

> A lot of extras playing the people had been the actual stormers
> eleven years before. So: *Lights. Camera and – Action.*
> The guards fire, the people reel back. *Cut!*
> A lot of the extras are kicking their last, there's blood anywhere,
> Dozens don't get up. (*Book III*: 500)

Seeing no difference in principle between the real and the represented war set, Fredy, like Louis, hangs on the awareness that unless the true self is acknowledged, life is not worth living. "There is a part of us, a self that doesn't really live / but is out to live forever, that watches and wrong-foots us. / It made me ask Tex his real name" (*Book III*: 504). Until one day Fredy is working as a background character and Marlene Dietrich appears on the set like a real epiphany, in which the star in flesh and bone summons Fredy with a powerful wavering of her hand and starts reading Rilke's poem *The Panther*, an image of Fredy's recondite poetic substance, a photograph that identifies his situation.

> *Do you know Rilke? His poem of the panther in the zoo? –*
> *Bit of a luxury, the poetry*, I said. *I'm a stranded sailor. –*
> *Rot*, she said. *'Bars pacing by have so worn out his sight*
> *that nothing is left to which he will respond.*
> *To him it seems steel bars are infinite,*
> *a thousand bars, and no more world behind.* (*Book III*: 524)

For the first time Fredy is in front of a true *poem* uninterested in mobilising anyone, and he immediately perceives it. "This was the sort that might not get men killed" (*Book III*: 524).

When in *Book V* Fredy refuses to be cured through *Shadenfreude*, he slowly starts to recover his longed for ordinariness. Thanks to the fact that he is an ill, desensitised strongman, he survives a mortal accident that sends him all fractured to hospital, reduced to a mummified Lazarus. His return to life occurs through a slow merging of his rational and unconscious life represented by the diurnal entertainment with friends and family and the nightly stories told by his Nazi roommate. He we may understand to be Fredy's double and therefore his stories represent a terrible confession, although the poem keeps the two roommates' identities apart so as to concede us the benefit of doubt as well as the chance of refusing that appalling possibility.

> I had faces round me looking down like a funeral […]
> Slowly things got solider. The mealtime spoon, my iron bed, […]
> One day Hans was in, and the sunk fellow in the next bed
> heard us talking German. He opened an eye, and another eye:
> *Deutsche was?* Sort of, but from here, not Germany […]
> He shifted ground then, the Obstuf – that's been his rank
> in his glamorous police-army. He never told me his name.
> He sniffed where I was weak, and told me bad stories instead:
> *One day we had to shoot old Jews who'd been Prussian Uhlans*, he said.
> […]
> It got to be like that in the room: friends and life in English,
> secret hell in German. *We'd melt snow water for those partisans.*
> *They'd hunch down: they knew what was coming. We'd arrange them*
> *artistically, then drench them, and they'd freeze to white statues*
> […]
> It took me two years till I dropped down that he most likely
> Couldn't stop confessing his stories, of where the massed drums had
> led him. (*Book V*: p. 786ff)

Final recovery comes through an indirect confession scene (confirming, perhaps, that the Nazi soldier's stories were Fredy's?), in which Fredy is deep in his thoughts, waiting for his daughter to come out of her music class, while his son is playing tennis against an invisible wall, and a response to his prayer comes from his unconscious, as if from the obscure partner that is playing tennis with his son.

> That Friday evening I had to collect Louise
> from her music lesson after school. Hans came up with me

> and got a tennis racket and started hitting a ball
> into the store space under the building opposite
> from where I sat to wait. There was a crucifix
> on the wall near me, and Jesus had his head turned hard
> to one side, as if he was watching just one player
> in Hans' tennis game; not Hans but the dark space that kept
> returning his shoots, mostly skew, so Hans had to chase them.
> You have to pray with a whole heart, says my inner man to me,
> And you haven't got one. *Can I get one?*
> (*Book V*: p. 806ff)

The scene takes us back to *Orlando* in which the way we arrive at some final truth after deep investigation is described in these exact terms, "For, when anybody comes to a conclusion it is as if they had tossed the ball over the net and must wait for the unseen antagonist to return it to them" (Woolf [1928] 2006: 259). An indirect response that is the language of *poems* – "Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?" (p. 288) – so that finally, we can say, it is to poetry's tribunal that Fredy's case is presented. The absolution that Fredy had asked the dark priest in Jerusalem for was not granted, because it should have been an act of self-confession taking place within him. Or this at least we deduce from Murray's reference to the conclusion of *Orlando* which explains that the impressions that tragic scenes leave in the mind are as traces 'at the back of the brain (the part farthest from sight),' like dark reflections that reason can hardly acknowledge, "deepening at the back of the brain (the part farthest from sight), into a pool where things dwell in darkness so deep that what we are we scarcely know" (p. 287).

The following morning Fredy gets up and realises that he has become fully normal and that ordinary life is so dense that one cannot simply describe it, "there's too much in life: you can't describe it" (*Book V*: 812). Description in fact, cannot render the mystery that lies in things, for which only poetic language is fit. So the case is closed in a way vaguely reminiscent of that one closing Eco's *In the Name of the Rose*, in which the friar admits his failure to solve the murder mystery, "There is too much confusion here" (Eco 1998: 493 quoted in Scagg 2005: 139). The difference, however, is that in *Fredy Neptune* it is acknowledgement of mystery that has been looked after.

3. *Fredy Neptune*'s involvement in crime fiction

Fredy Neptune may be said to have a twofold controversial relation with crime fiction, whose main feature, as Todorov explains, is the disappointment of its constitutive norms, which is responsible for the evolution of the genre[6]. On the one hand, it is thoroughly antithetical to crime fiction, reflecting Murray's aesthetic and political positions; on the other, it is drenched in it because it is a relevant part of Fredy's cultural background, as especially hard-boiled fiction became films and comic strips adaptations and as such entered popular imagination also in Australia (Patrick 2012).

The story's content, as well as the circumstances in which it was written, qualify *Fredy Neptune* as anti-crime fiction for three main reasons: *first*, it originates in introspection and it is a poetic account of the way Murray came to terms with his chronic depression; *second*, it is the story of a body rather than of a mastermind; *third*, it is set in a worldwide scenario where the legal states of police are the main murderer.

Albeit in this controversial way, Fredy's story oppositely compares to some key-elements of the traditional detective-story. His narration *verbatim* recalls the detective's alter ego's recount of the genial investigation (after all, it is through Fredy's tale that we discover Murray's poetic genius). His story, however, is more a sort of witnessing and a request to Murray to find out the cause of his guilt and of his final delivery, in which Fredy does his best to prove his innocence by producing jolly photos of himself as a civilian – "Here's me around then in the hat that Laura gave me" (Murray 1988, *Book II*: 184) or showing his wounded body. "[…] here, all up my calf, you can see it / […] One of his blue dragons had come real. I went on burning – see how deep it goes in?" (*Book I*: 32ff). Also, the story of his immunised cadaverous body reverses the lack of gruesome scenes in the Golden Age of crime fiction, in war years when dead bodies were under everybody's eyes (Scagg 2005: 43ff), addressing, perhaps, their part in a long-standing tradition based on the repression of the body, which Woolf has described in a famous essay.

[6] "Detective fiction has its norms; to 'develop' them is also to disappoint them: to 'improve upon' detective fiction is to write literature, not detective fiction" (Todorov 1966: 43).

> [L]iterature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear and, save for one or two passions, such as desire and greed, is null and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. […] People write only of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how the mind has civilized the universe. They show it ignoring the body in the philosopher's turret; or kicking the body, like an old leather football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquer or discovery. Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth. (Woolf [1926] 2012: 4-5)

Because Fredy performs his story in the present, also mimicking the voices of several other characters, and speaks in a jargon that recalls action films and spy stories, we forget that it is a memoir, and in terms of crime fiction its narrative resembles much more a thriller than a detective-story (Todorov 1977: 47-50). Fredy's misadventures move before us like a hard-boiled movie in which the solitary hero traverses a world turned upside down where state and police are the criminals, and one that frequently turns into a comic strip. "I staggered up. I reefed, I /wrenched the car up, off them. Held it up, /walked it to the side. The one boy was busted. Bubbling and dying" (*Book II*: 97)

Such body language Woolf calls for in her essay *On Being Ill*, lamenting its absence in English and the need for a non-British writer to invent it, a writer, that is, who feels less constricted by the tradition, and may have the audacity to express the laughable vulgarities of the body's experiences. It is not only a matter of vocabulary, but a re-ordering of the hierarchy of passions, ranking pain alongside love or envy.

> [L]et a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other […], so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out. Probably it will be something laughable. For who of English birth can take liberties with the language? To us it is a sacred thing and therefore doomed to die, unless the Americans, whose genius is

so much happier in the making of new words than in the disposition of the old, will come to our help and set the spring aflow. Yet it is not only a new language that we need, more primitive, more sensual, more obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions […]. (Woolf [1926] 2012: 7)

It is especially in *Book III*, wholly set in the US, that Fredy enters the world of hard-boiled fiction, travelling across its historical developments including its British gothic origins in revenge stories rooted in Renaissance theatre; its characteristic Los Angeles settings; the later ethnic and gender developments (Scaggs 2005: 55ff). The book is divided into three main sequences in which we first see Fredy living in a villa in Kentucky owned by an Australian gangster, a Machiavellian figure supporting segregation and local corruption as well as maintaining a court of supermen, including Fredy, strongmen, victims of their countries' injustice but unable to do anything against it. A Gothic place where people stab each other for jealousy and revenge, formally a madhouse where forms of private violence are legally justified, and where the gangster has a library of Renaissance literature. Then the place is destroyed and Fredy moves to the west coast, experiencing persecution as a hobo and alongside a black fellow; to finally settle in Los Angeles where he leads the life of a bohemian in Hollywood, where in these very years hard-boiled fiction was invented, amidst typical run-down urban peripheries but also engaging in true relationships with desperate people in search of fortune in the movies, and marginal figures, homeless, dispossessed peasants, either *femmes fatales* à la Dietrich or single mothers, the incriminated others of American crime fiction.

There is a third more radical way in which *Fredy Neptune* gets involved in crime fiction, in which it kills its very *raison d'être*. Fredy's recovery, his ordinary act of leaving the bed, in fact, inflicts a mortal stab to the evil of those modern, or murder, times which have deeply engaged *Fredy Neptune* and whose insane climate it finally turns, alongside Fredy, back to normal. Fredy's getting-up changes the venomous air pervading Woolf's essay on illness, in which she praises the graces allowed by the ill body, whose conditions concede a suspension from the hallucinating "army of the upright marches to battle" (Woolf [1926] 2012: 16); where, specifically, she blesses the chance of taking a lengthy look at the sky or at a flower dying

in a vase; or, equally, the luxury of reading poetry and enjoying its otherwise unnoticed multisensory language. Salutary sights, Woolf believes, whose main lesson is indifference, the necessary unconcern that the healthy show to the ill, because human beings cannot afford sympathy unless they interrupt their daily battles. Instead, being ill provides a momentary glimpse of eternity and the chance of indulging in the type of thoughts that Lamb writes about in his *Letters*, which Woolf quotes: "I'm a sanguinary murderer of time, and would kill him inchmeal just now. But the snake is vital" (p. 20). A type of illusions not different from that provided by the detective-stories that Auden analyses.

The real disease of Woolf's times lies in the final part of her essay, in which she gives an example of the type of sympathy one we may learn when one is so lucky as to feel bad and take an interest in the inferior and the unfortunate. So in the last pages of the essay we see Woolf appraising a boring Victorian novel, miles below her standards, making the effort of getting involved in ludicrous verbose episodes and even appreciating patriarchal values that make women prone to self-denial and the willing sacrifice of their intellectual attitudes[7]. In short, she makes us read a tale that turns out to be the tail of a devil she has fought all life long, and one that now she seems to declare as a sacrifice called for by the times.

It is such indifference and the stoic endurance it requires to be the real disease, one contracted by accepting pain and the view that one is unable to do anything against it. The cure, Susan Sonntag argues in a famous book, lies in either avoiding looking at pain if one cannot stop it or investigating its causes and the reasons why one accepts it (Sonntag 2003). From all this Fredy, and Murray, have turned.

In conclusion, *Fredy Neptune* seems to mostly belong to a type of literary texts that J.M. Coetzee has defined as "confessional" (Coetzee 1992: 252), investigations based on the self's quest for guilt and responsibility for being involved in acts of immorality. As in

[7] "He was killed. She knew it before they told her, and never could Sir John Leslie forget, when he ran downstairs on the day of the burial, the beauty of the great lady standing to see the hearse depart, nor, when he came back, how the curtain, heavy, mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony" (Woolf [1926] 2012: 28).

Fredy Neptune, these text types are composed of two stories, the confessional narration of the crime and the story of its absolution through divine intercession, for which there is no secular equivalent. Because in such stories the mind is overwhelmed by evil, it is the body, Coetzee sustains, that becomes the crucial agent of resistance detaining real power. It's an assumption of authority that the suffering body *takes* by itself and not one that the mind *can* grant it. In South Africa, as in most parts of the ex-colonial world, the body has this undeniable force (Coetzee 1992: 248) and, as we have seen, one that may overturn the trend of mainstream European modernity. In the case of *Fredy Neptune* the confessional text becomes part of crime fiction because pardon requires Murray's poetic investigation and spiritual mystery. The first story, the confession, is told in Fredy's hard-boiled language where the mind pops in, at times, to hide its own responsibilities. The second story, that of Murray's detection, has two possible interpretations: 1) it may be seen as providing a trans-historical transcultural explanation through the instruments of poetry – the associative process that has led us to find pieces of information in Woolf and Shakespeare – and in the light of which we come to better comprehend Fredy's guilt and to forgive him, as we see that it concerns us too; 2) it can be seen as a final redemption granted by a power that Murray can rely on and whose substance belongs in a more solid but invisible ground whose existence we can hardly prove.

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